

W. Marshall

A
V I E W
OF THE
INTERNAL EVIDENCE
OF THE
CHRISTIAN RELIGION.



A

V I E W

William OF THE *Marshall*

INTERNAL EVIDENCE

OF THE

CHRISTIAN RELIGION.

R

Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian.

Acts xxvi. 28.

THE SECOND EDITION.

L O N D O N :

Printed for J. DODSLEY, in Pall-Mall.

M.DCC.LXXVI.



A
V I E W
OF THE
INTERNAL EVIDENCE
OF THE
CHRISTIAN RELIGION.

MOST of the writers, who have undertaken to prove the divine origin of the Christian Religion, have had recourse to arguments drawn from these three heads: the prophecies still extant in the Old Testament, the miracles recorded in the New, or the
B internal

internal evidence arising from that excellence, and those clear marks of supernatural interposition, which are so conspicuous in the religion itself: The two former have been sufficiently explained and enforced by the ablest pens; but the last, which seems to carry with it the greatest degree of conviction, has never, I think, been considered with that attention, which it deserves.

I mean not here to depreciate the proofs arising from either prophecies, or miracles: they both have or ought to have their proper weight; prophecies are permanent miracles, whose authority is sufficiently confirmed by their completion,

pletion, and are therefore solid proofs of the supernatural origin of a religion, whose truth they were intended to testify; such are those to be found in various parts of the scriptures relative to the coming of the Messiah, the destruction of Jerusalem, and the unexampled state in which the Jews have ever since continued, all so circumstantially descriptive of the events, that they seem rather histories of past, than predictions of future transactions; and whoever will seriously consider the immense distance of time between some of them and the events which they foretell, the uninterrupted chain by which they are connected for many thousand

years, how exactly they correspond with those events, and how totally unapplicable they are to all others in the history of mankind; I say, whoever considers these circumstances, he will scarcely be persuaded to believe, that they can be the productions of preceding artifice, or posterior application, or can entertain the least doubt of their being derived from supernatural inspiration.

The miracles recorded in the New Testament to have been performed by Christ and his Apostles, were certainly convincing proofs of their divine commission to those who saw them; and as they were seen by such numbers, and are as well

well attested, as other historical facts, and above all, as they were wrought on so great and so wonderful an occasion, they must still be admitted as evidence of no inconsiderable force; but, I think, they must now depend for much of their credibility on the truth of that religion, whose credibility they were at first intended to support. To prove therefore the truth of the Christian Religion, we should begin by shewing the internal marks of Divinity, which are stamped upon it; because on this the credibility of the prophecies and miracles in a great measure depends: for if we have once reason to be convinced, that this religion is de-

rived from a supernatural origin; prophecies and miracles will become so far from being incredible, that it will be highly probable, that a supernatural revelation should be foretold, and enforced by supernatural means.

What pure Christianity is, divested of all its ornaments, appendages, and corruption, I pretend not to say; but what it is not, I will venture to affirm, which is, that it is not the offspring of fraud or fiction: such, on a superficial view, I know it must appear to every man of good sense, whose sense has been altogether employed on other subjects; but if any one will give himself the trouble to examine it
with

with accuracy and candor, he will plainly see that however fraud and fiction may have grown up with it, yet it never could have been grafted on the same stock, nor planted by the same hand.

To ascertain the true system, and genuine doctrines of this religion after the undecided controversies of above seventeen centuries, and to remove all the rubbish, which artifice and ignorance have been heaping upon it during all that time, would indeed be an arduous task, which I shall by no means undertake; but to shew, that it cannot possibly be derived from human wisdom, or human im-

posture, is a work, I think, attended with no great difficulty, and requiring no extraordinary abilities, and therefore I shall attempt that, and that alone, by stating, and then explaining the following plain, and undeniable propositions.

First, that there is now extant a book intituled the New Testament.

Secondly, that from this book may be extracted a system of religion intirely new, both with regard to the object and the doctrines, not only infinitely superior to, but unlike every thing, which had ever before entered into the mind of man.

Thirdly,

Thirdly, that from this book may likewise be collected a system of ethicks, in which every moral precept founded on reason is carried to a higher degree of purity and perfection, than in any other of the wisest philosophers of preceding ages ; every moral precept founded on false principles is totally omitted, and many new precepts added peculiarly corresponding with the new object of this religion.

Lastly, that such a system of religion and morality could not possibly have been the work of any man, or set of men ; much less of those obscure, ignorant, and illiterate persons, who actually did
discover,

discover, and publish it to the world; and that therefore it must undoubtedly have been effected by the interposition of divine power, that is, that it must derive its origin from God.

PRO-

PROPOSITION I.

VERY little need be said,
 to establish my first Proposition, which is singly this: that there is now extant a book intitled the New Testament: that is, there is a collection of writings distinguished by that denomination, containing four historical accounts of the birth, life, actions, discourses and death of an extraordinary person named Jesus Christ, who was born in the reign of Augustus Cæsar, preached a new religion throughout the country of Judæa, and was put to a cruel and ignominious death in the reign of Tiberius. Also one other historical
 account

account of the travels, tranſactions, and orations of ſome mean and illiterate men, known by the title of his apoſtles, whom he commiſſioned to propagate his religion after his death; which he foretold them he muſt ſuffer in confirmation of its truth. To theſe are added ſeveral epiſtolary writings, addreſſed by theſe perſons to their fellow-labourers in this work, or to the ſeveral churches or ſocieties of chriſtians, which they had eſta-bliſhed in the ſeveral cities through which they had paſſed.

It would not be difficult to prove, that theſe books were written ſoon after thoſe extraordinary events, which are the ſubjects of them; as we find them quoted,
and

and referred to by an uninterrupted succession of writers from those to the present times: nor would it be less easy to shew, that the truth of all those events, miracles only excepted, can no more be reasonably questioned, than the truth of any other facts recorded in any history whatever: as there can be no more reason to doubt, that there existed such a person as Jesus Christ, speaking, acting, and suffering in such a manner as is there described, than that there were such men as Tiberius, Herod, or Pontius Pilate, his cotemporaries, or to suspect, that Peter, Paul, and James were not the authors of those epistles, to which their names
are

are affixed, than that Cicero and Pliny did not write those which are ascribed to them. It might also be made appear, that these books having been wrote by various persons at different times, and in distant places, could not possibly have been the work of a single impostor, nor of a fraudulent combination, being all stamped with the same marks of an uniform originality in their very frame and composition.

But all these circumstances I shall pass over unobserved, as they do not fall in with the course of my argument, nor are necessary for the support of it. Whether these books were wrote by the

authors whose names are prefixed to them, whether they have been enlarged, diminished, or any way corrupted by the artifice or ignorance of translators, or transcribers; whether in the historical parts the writers were instructed by a perpetual, a partial, or by any inspiration at all; whether in the religious and moral parts, they received their doctrines from a divine influence, or from the instructions and conversation of their master; whether in their facts or sentiments there is always the most exact agreement, or whether in both they sometimes differ from each other; whether they are in any case mistaken, or always infallible;

fallible; or ever pretended to be so, I shall not here dispute: let the Deist avail himself of all these doubts and difficulties, and decide them in conformity to his own opinions, I shall not contend, because they affect not my argument: all that I assert is a plain fact, which cannot be denied, that such writings do now exist.

P R O -

PROPOSITION II.

MY second proposition is not quite so simple, but, I think, not less undeniable than the former, and is this: that from this book may be extracted a system of religion intirely new, both with regard to the object, and the doctrines, not only infinitely superior to, but totally unlike every thing, which had ever before entered into the mind of man: I say extracted, because all the doctrines of this religion having been delivered at various times, and on various occasions, and here only historically recorded, no uniform or regular

C

system

system of theology is here to be found; and better perhaps it had been, if less labour had been employed by the learned, to bend and twist these divine materials into the polished forms of human systems, to which they never will submit, and for which they were never intended by their great author. Why he chose not to leave any such behind him we know not, but it might possibly be, because he knew, that the imperfection of man was incapable of receiving such a system, and that we are more properly, and more safely conducted by the distant, and scattered rays, than by the too powerful sunshine of divine illumination:

mination: " If I have told you
 " earthly things," says he, " and ye
 " believe not, how shall ye be-
 " lieve, if I tell you of heavenly
 " things*?" that is, if my instruc-
 tions concerning your behaviour
 in the present as relative to a fu-
 ture life, are so difficult to be un-
 derstood, that you can scarcely
 believe me, how shall you believe,
 if I endeavoured to explain to you
 the nature of celestial Beings, the
 designs of Providence, and the
 mysteries of his dispensations; sub-
 jects which you have neither ideas
 to comprehend, nor language to
 express?

* John iii. 12.

First then, the object of this religion is intirely new, and is this, to prepare us by a state of probation for the kingdom of heaven. This is every where professed by Christ and his apostles to be the chief end of the christian's life; the crown for which he is to contend, the goal to which he is to run, the harvest which is to pay him for all his labors: Yet previous to their preaching no such prize was ever hung out to mankind, nor any means prescribed for the attainment of it.

It is indeed true, that some of the philosophers of antiquity entertained notions of a future state, but mixed with much doubt and
uncer-

uncertainty: their legislators also endeavoured to infuse into the minds of the people a belief of rewards and punishments after death; but by this they only intended to give a sanction to their laws, and to enforce the practice of virtue for the benefit of mankind in the present life: this alone seems to have been their end, and a meritorious end it was; but Christianity not only operates more effectually to this end, but has a nobler design in view, which is by a proper education here to render us fit members of a celestial society hereafter. In all former religions the good of the present life was the first object; in the Christian it is

but the second; in those men were incited to promote that good by the hopes of a future reward; in this the practice of virtue is in-joined in order to qualify them for that reward. There is great difference, I apprehend, in these two plans, that is in adhering to Virtue from its present utility in expectation of future happiness, and living in such a manner as to qualify us for the acceptance, and enjoyment of that happiness; and the conduct and dispositions of those, who act on these different principles, must be no less different: on the first the constant practice of justice, temperance, and sobriety, will be sufficient; but on the latter, we must
add

add to these an habitual piety, faith, resignation, and contempt of the world: the first may make us very good citizens, but will never produce a tolerable christian. Hence it is that Christianity insists more strongly, than any preceding institution religious or moral, on purity of heart and a benevolent disposition; because these are absolutely necessary to its great end; but in those whose recommendations of virtue regard the present life only, and whose promised rewards in another were low and sensual, no preparatory qualifications were requisite to enable men to practise the one, or to enjoy the other: and therefore we see this object is pec-

culiar to this religion; and with it was intirely new.

But although this object, and the principle on which it is founded were new, and perhaps undiscoverable by reason, yet when discovered, they are so consonant to it, that we cannot but readily assent to them. For the truth of this principle, that the present life is a state of probation, and education to prepare us for another, is confirmed by every thing which we see around us: It is the only key which can open to us the designs of Providence in the œconomy of human affairs, the only clue, which can guide us through that pathless wilderness, and the
only

only plan on which this world could possibly have been formed, or on which the history of it can be comprehended or explained. It could never have been formed on a plan of happiness : because it is every where overspread with innumerable miseries; nor of misery, because it is interspersed with many enjoyments: it could not have been constituted for a scene of wisdom and virtue, because the history of mankind is little more than a detail of their follies, and wickedness: nor of vice, because that is no plan at all, being destructive of all existence, and consequently of its own: But on this system all that we here meet with,
may

may be easily accounted for; for this mixture of happiness and misery, of virtue and vice, necessarily results from a state of probation and education; as probation implies trials, sufferings, and a capacity of offending, and education a propriety of chastisement for those offences.

In the next place the doctrines of this religion are equally new with the object; and contain ideas of God, and of man, of the present, and of a future life; and of the relations which all these bear to each other totally unheard of, and quite dissimilar from any which had ever been thought on, previous to its publication. No
other

no other ever drew so just a portrait of the worthlessness of this world, and all its pursuits, nor exhibited such distinct, lively and exquisite pictures of the joys of another; of the resurrection of the dead, the last judgment, and the triumphs of the righteous in that tremendous day, “when this corruptible shall put on incorruption, and this mortal shall put on immortality *.” No other has ever represented the supreme Being in the character of three persons united in one God †. No other has

* 1 Cor. xv. 53.

† That there subsists some such union in the divine nature, the whole tenour of the New Testament seems to express, and it

has attempted to reconcile those seeming contradictory but both true propositions, the contingency of future events, and the foreknowledge of God, or the free will of the creature with the overruling grace of the Creator. No other has so fully declared the necessity of wickedness and punishment, yet so effectually instructed individuals to resist the one, and to escape the other: no other has ever pretended to give it was so understood in the earliest ages: but whether this union does, or does not imply equality, or whether it subsists in general, or only in particular circumstances, we are not informed, and therefore on these questions it is not only unnecessary, but improper for us to decide.

any

any account of the depravity of man, or to point out any remedy for it: no other has ventured to declare the unpardonable nature of sin without the influence of a mediatorial interposition, and a vicarious atonement from the sufferings of a superior Being *. Whether these wonderful doctrines

* That Christ suffered and died as an atonement for the sins of mankind, is a doctrine so constantly and so strongly enforced through every part of the New Testament, that whoever will seriously peruse those writings, and deny that it is there, may, with as much reason and truth, after reading the works of Thucydides and Livy, assert, that in them no mention is made of any facts relative to the histories of Greece and Rome.

are

are worthy of our belief must depend on the opinion, which we entertain of the authority of those, who published them to the world; but certain it is, that they are all so far removed from every tract of the human imagination, that it seems equally impossible, that they should ever have been derived from the knowledge, or the artifice of man.

Some indeed there are, who, by perverting the established signification of words, (which they call explaining) have ventured to expunge all these doctrines out of the scriptures, for no other reason than that they are not able to comprehend them; and argue thus:—

The

The scriptures are the word of God; in his word no propositions contradictory to reason can have a place; these propositions are contradictory to reason, and therefore they are not there: But if these bold assertors would claim any regard, they should reverse their argument, and say,—These doctrines make a part, and a material part of the scriptures, they are contradictory to reason; no propositions contradictory to reason can be a part of the word of God, and therefore neither the scriptures, nor the pretended revelation contained in them, can be derived from him; This would be an argument worthy of rational and candid Deists, and

and demand a respectful attention; but when men pretend to disprove facts by reasoning, they have no right to expect an answer.

And here I cannot omit observing, that the personal character of the author of this religion is no less new, and extraordinary, than the religion itself, who “spake as
“never man spake*,” and lived as never man lived: in proof of this, I do not mean to alledge, that he was born of a virgin, that he fasted forty days, that he performed a variety of miracles, and after being buried three days, that he arose from the dead; because these accounts will have but little

* John vii. 46.

effect on the minds of unbelievers, who, if they believe not the religion, will give no credit to the relation of these facts; but I will prove it from facts, which cannot be disputed; for instance, he is the only founder of a religion in the history of mankind, which is totally unconnected with all human policy and government, and therefore totally uncondusive to any worldly purpose whatever: all others, Mahomet, Numa, and even Moses himself, blended their religious institutions with their civil, and by them obtained dominion over their respective people; but Christ neither aimed at, nor would accept of any such power; he re-

D

jected

jected every object, which all other men pursue, and made choice of all those which others fly from, and are afraid of: he refused power, riches, honours, and pleasure, and courted poverty, ignominy, tortures, and death. Many have been the enthusiasts, and impostors, who have endeavoured to impose on the world pretended revelations, and some of them from pride, obstinacy, or principle, have gone so far, as to lay down their lives, rather than retract; but I defy history to shew one, who ever made his own sufferings and death a necessary part of his original plan, and essential to his mission; this Christ actually did, he foresaw, foretold,

foretold, declared, their necessity, and voluntarily endured them. If we seriously contemplate the divine lessons, the perfect precepts, the beautiful discourses, and the consistent conduct of this wonderful person, we cannot possibly imagine, that he could have been either an idiot or a madman; and yet, if he was not what he pretended to be, he can be considered in no other light; and even under this character he would deserve some attention, because of so sublime and rational an insanity there is no other instance in the history of mankind.

If any one can doubt of the superior excellence of this religion

D 2

above

above all which preceded it, let him but peruse with attention those unparalleled writings in which it is transmitted to the present times, and compare them with the most celebrated productions of the pagan world; and if he is not sensible of their superior beauty, simplicity, and originality, I will venture to pronounce, that he is as deficient in Taste as in Faith, and that he is as bad a Critic as a Christian: for in what school of ancient philosophy can he find a lesson of morality so perfect as Christ's sermon on the mount? From which of them can he collect an address to the Deity so concise, and yet so comprehensive, so expressive

pressive of all that we want, and all
 that we could deprecate, as that
 short prayer, which he formed for,
 and recommended to his disciples ?
 From the works of what sage of an-
 tiquity can he produce so pathetic
 a recommendation of benevolence
 to the distressed, and enforced by
 such assurances of a reward, as in
 those words of Christ ? “ Come, ye
 “ blessed of my Father ! inherit the
 “ kingdom prepared for you from
 “ the foundation of the world :
 “ for I was an hungred, and ye
 “ gave me meat ; I was thirsty,
 “ and ye gave me drink ; I was a
 “ stranger, and ye took me in ; I
 “ was naked, and ye clothed me ;
 “ I was sick, and ye visited me ;

“ I was in prison, and ye came un-
 “ to me. Then shall the righteous
 “ answer him, saying ;—Lord, when
 “ saw we thee an hungred, and fed
 “ thee, or thirsty, and gave thee
 “ drink ? when saw we thee a stran-
 “ ger, and took thee in, or naked,
 “ and clothed thee ? or when saw
 “ we thee sick and in prison, and
 “ came unto thee ? Then shall I
 “ answer and say unto them ;—
 “ Verily I say unto you, inasmuch
 “ as you have done it to the least
 “ of these my brethren, ye have
 “ done it unto me*.” Where is
 there so just, and so elegant a re-
 proof of eagerness and anxiety in

* Matt. xxv. 34.

worldly pursuits, closed with so forcible an exhortation to confidence in the goodness of our Creator, as in these words?—" Be-
 " hold the fowls of the air; for
 " they sow not, neither do they
 " reap, nor gather into barns, yet
 " your heavenly Father feedeth
 " them. Are ye not much better
 " than they? Consider the lillies
 " of the field, how they grow; they
 " toil not, neither do they spin;
 " and yet I say unto you, that even
 " Solomon in all his glory was not
 " arrayed like one of these: where-
 " fore, if God so clothe the grass
 " of the field, which to-day is, and
 " to-morrow is cast into the oven,
 " shall he not much more clothe
 D 4 " you?

“you? O ye of little faith*!” By which of their most celebrated poets are the joys reserved for the righteous in a future state, so sublimely described, as by this short declaration, that they are superior to all description? “Eye hath not
 “seen, nor ear heard, neither have
 “entered into the heart of man, the
 “things, which God hath prepared
 “for them that love him †.” Where amidst the dark clouds of pagan philosophy can he shew us such a clear prospect of a future state, the immortality of the soul, the resurrection of the dead, and the general judgment, as in St. Paul’s first epistle to the Corinthians? Or

* Matt. vi. 26. 28. † 1 Cor. ii. 9.

from whence can he produce such cogent exhortations to the practice of every virtue, such ardent incitements to piety and devotion, and such assistances to attain them, as those which are to be met with throughout every page of these inimitable writings? To quote all the passages in them relative to these subjects, would be almost to transcribe the whole; it is sufficient to observe, that they are every where stamped with such apparent marks of supernatural assistance, as render them indisputably superior to, and totally unlike all human compositions whatever; and this superiority and dissimilarity is still more strongly marked

marked by one remarkable circumstance peculiar to themselves, which is, that whilst the moral parts, being of the most general use, are intelligible to the meanest capacities, the learned and inquisitive throughout all ages, perpetually find in them inexhaustible discoveries, concerning the nature, attributes, and dispensations of Providence.

To say the truth, before the appearance of Christianity there existed nothing like religion on the face of the earth; the Jewish only excepted: all other nations were immersed in the grossest idolatry, which had little or no connection with morality, except to corrupt it
by

by the infamous examples of their imaginary deities: they all worshipped a multiplicity of gods and dæmons, whose favour they courted by impious, obscene, and ridiculous ceremonies, and whose anger they endeavoured to appease by the most abominable cruelties. In the politest ages of the politest nations in the world, at a time when Greece and Rome had carried the arts of oratory, poetry, history, architecture and sculpture to the highest perfection, and made no inconsiderable advances in those of mathematics, natural, and even moral philosophy, in religious knowledge they had made none at all; a strong presumption, that the noblest

noblest efforts of the mind of man unassisted by revelation were unequal to the task. Some few indeed of their philosophers were wise enough to reject these general absurdities, and dared to attempt a loftier flight : Plato introduced many sublime ideas of nature, and its first cause, and of the immortality of the soul, which being above his own and all human discovery, he probably acquired from the books of Moses or the conversation of some Jewish rabbies, which he might have met with in Egypt, where he resided, and studied for several years : from him Aristotle, and from both Cicero and some few others drew most
amazing

amazing stores of philosophical science, and carried their researches into divine truths as far as human genius alone could penetrate. But these were bright constellations, which appeared singly in several centuries, and even these with all this knowledge were very deficient in true theology. From the visible works of the Creation they traced the being and principal attributes of the Creator ; but the relation which his being and attributes bear to man they little understood ; of piety and devotion they had scarce any sense, nor could they form any mode of worship worthy of the purity and perfection of the divine nature : they occasionally

flung out many elegant encomiums on the native beauty, and excellence of virtue: but they founded it not on the commands of God, nor connected it with a holy life, nor hung out the happiness of heaven as its reward, or its object. They sometimes talked of virtue carrying men to heaven, and placing them amongst the gods; but by this virtue they meant only the invention of arts, or feats of arms: for with them heaven was open only to legislators, and conquerors, the civilizers, or destroyers of mankind. This was then the summit of religion in the most polished nations in the world, and even this was confined to a few

few philosophers, prodigies of genius and literature, who were little attended to, and less understood by the generality of mankind in their own countries; whilst all the rest were involved in one common cloud of ignorance and superstition.

At this time Christianity broke forth from the east like a rising sun, and dispelled this universal darkness, which obscured every part of the globe, and even at this day prevails in all those remoter regions, to which its salutary influence has not as yet extended. From all those which it has reached, it has, notwithstanding its corruptions, banished all those enormities,

mities, and introduced a more rational devotion, and purer morals : It has taught men the unity, and attributes of the supreme Being, the remission of sins, the resurrection of the dead, life everlasting, and the kingdom of heaven ; doctrines as inconceivable to the wisest of mankind antecedent to its appearance, as the Newtonian system is at this day to the most ignorant tribes of savages in the wilds of America ; doctrines, which human reason never could have discovered, but which when discovered, coincide with, and are confirmed by it ; and which, though beyond the reach of all the learning and penetration
of

of Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero, are now clearly laid open to the eye of every peasant and mechanic with the Bible in his hand. These are all plain facts too glaring to be contradicted, and therefore, whatever we may think of the authority of these books, the relations which they contain, or the inspiration of their authors, of these facts no man, who has eyes to read, or ears to hear, can entertain a doubt ; because there are the books, and in them is this religion.

PROPOSITION III.

MY third proposition is this; that from this book called the New Testament, may be collected a system of ethics, in which every moral precept founded on reason is carried to a higher degree of purity and perfection, than in any other of the antient philosophers of preceding ages; every moral precept founded on false principles is entirely omitted, and many new precepts added, peculiarly corresponding with the new object of this religion.

By moral precepts founded on reason, I mean all those, which enforce

force the practice of such duties as reason informs us must improve our natures, and conduce to the happiness of mankind: such are piety to God, benevolence to men, justice, charity, temperance, and sobriety, with all those, which prohibit the commission of the contrary vices, all which debase our natures, and, by mutual injuries, introduce universal disorder, and consequently universal misery. By precepts founded on false principles, I mean those which recommend fictitious virtues productive of none of these salutary effects, and therefore, however celebrated and admired, are in fact no virtues

at all; such are valour, patriotism, and friendship.

That virtues of the first kind are carried to a higher degree of purity and perfection by the christian religion than by any other, it is here unnecessary to prove, because this is a truth, which has been so frequently demonstrated by her friends, and never once denied by the most determined of her adversaries; but it will be proper to shew, that those of the latter sort are most judiciously omitted; because they have really no intrinsic merit in them, and are totally incompatible with the genius and spirit of this institution.

Valour,

Valour, for instance, or active courage, is for the most part constitutional, and therefore can have no more claim to moral merit, than wit, beauty, health, strength, or any other endowment of the mind or body; and so far is it from producing any salutary effects by introducing peace, order, or happiness into society, that it is the usual perpetrator of all the violences, which from retaliated injuries distract the world with bloodshed and devastation. It is the engine by which the strong are enabled to plunder the weak, the proud to trample upon the humble, and the guilty to oppress the innocent; it is the chief instrument

which Ambition employs in her unjust pursuits of wealth and power, and is therefore so much extolled by her votaries : it was indeed congenial with the religion of pagans, whose gods were for the most part made out of deceased heroes, exalted to heaven as a reward for the mischiefs which they had perpetrated upon earth, and therefore with them this was the first of virtues, and had even engrossed that denomination to itself ; but whatever merit it may have assumed among pagans, with christians it can pretend to none, and few or none are the occasions in which they are permitted to exert it : they are so far from being allowed to inflict evil,

evil, that they are forbid even to resist it ; they are so far from being encouraged to revenge injuries, that one of their first duties is to forgive them ; so far from being incited to destroy their enemies, that they are commanded to love them, and to serve them to the utmost of their power. If christian nations therefore were nations of christians, all war would be impossible and unknown amongst them, and valour could be neither of use or estimation, and therefore could never have a place in the catalogue of christian virtues, being irreconcilable with all its precepts. I object not to the praise and honours bestowed on the

valiant, they are the least tribute which can be paid them by those who enjoy safety and affluence by the intervention of their dangers and sufferings ; I assert only that active courage can never be a christian virtue, because a christian can have nothing to do with it. Passive courage is indeed frequently, and properly inculcated by this meek and suffering religion, under the titles of patience and resignation : a real and substantial virtue this, and a direct contrast to the former ; for passive courage arises from the noblest dispositions of the human mind, from a contempt of misfortunes, pain, and death, and a confidence in the protection of
the

the Almighty; active from the meanest: from passion, vanity, and self-dependence: passive courage is derived from a zeal for truth, and a perseverance in duty; active is the offspring of pride and revenge, and the parent of cruelty and injustice: in short passive courage is the resolution of a philosopher, active the ferocity of a savage. Nor is this more incompatible with the precepts, than with the object of this religion, which is the attainment of the kingdom of heaven; for valour is not that sort of violence, by which that kingdom is to be taken; nor are the turbulent spirits of heroes and conquerors admissible into those regions

regions of peace, subordination, and tranquillity.

Patriotism also, that celebrated virtue so much practised in ancient, and so much professed in modern times, that virtue, which so long preserved the liberties of Greece, and exalted Rome to the empire of the world: this celebrated virtue, I say, must also be excluded; because it not only falls short of, but directly counteracts, the extensive Benevolence of this religion. A christian is of no country, he is a citizen of the world; and his neighbours and countrymen are the inhabitants of the remotest regions, whenever their distresses demand his friendly assistance: Christianity commands

us to love all mankind, Patriotism to oppress all other countries to advance the imaginary prosperity of our own : Christianity enjoins us to imitate the universal benevolence of our Creator, who pours forth his blessings on every nation upon earth ; Patriotism to copy the mean partiality of an English parish officer, who thinks injustice and cruelty meritorious, whenever they promote the interests of his own inconsiderable village. This has ever been a favourite virtue with mankind, because it conceals self-interest under the mask of public spirit, not only from others, but even from themselves, and gives a licence to inflict wrongs

wrongs and injuries not only with impunity, but with applause; but it is so diametrically opposite to the great characteristic of this institution, that it never could have been admitted into the list of christian virtues.

Friendship likewise, although more congenial to the principles of Christianity arising from more tender and amiable dispositions, could never gain admittance amongst her benevolent precepts for the same reason; because it is too narrow and confined, and appropriates that benevolence to a single object, which is here commanded to be extended over all: Where friendships arise from similarity of sentiments, and disin-

disinterested affections, they are advantageous, agreeable, and innocent, but have little pretensions to merit; for it is justly observed, "If ye love them, which love you, what thanks have ye? for sinners also love those, that love them*." But if they are formed from alliances in parties, factions, and interests, or from a participation of vices, the usual parents of what are called friendships among mankind, they are then both mischievous and criminal, and consequently forbidden, but in their utmost purity deserve no recommendation from this religion.

* Luke vi. 32.

To the judicious omission of these false virtues we may add that remarkable silence, which the Christian Legislator every where preserves on subjects esteemed by all others of the highest importance, civil government, national policy, and the rights of war and peace; of these he has not taken the least notice, probably for this plain reason, because it would have been impossible to have formed any explicit regulations concerning them, which must not have been inconsistent with the purity of his religion, or with the practical observance of such imperfect creatures as men ruling over, and contending with each other: For instance,
had

had he absolutely forbid all resistance to the reigning powers, he had constituted a plan of despotism, and made men slaves ; had he allowed it, he must have authorised disobedience and made them rebels : had he in direct terms prohibited all war, he must have left his followers for ever an easy prey to every infidel invader ; had he permitted it, he must have licensed all that rapine and murder, with which it is unavoidably attended.

Let us now examine what are those new precepts in this religion peculiarly corresponding with the new object of it, that is preparing us for the kingdom of heaven : Of these the chief are poorness of spirit,

rit, forgiveness of injuries, and charity to all men; to these we may add repentance, faith, self-abasement, and a detachment from the world, all moral duties peculiar to this religion, and absolutely necessary to the attainment of its end.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit;
 “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*.” By which poorness of spirit is to be understood a disposition of mind, meek, humble, submissive to power, void of ambition, patient of injuries, and free from all resentment: This was so new, and so opposite to the ideas of all Pagan moralists, that they thought

* Matt. v. 3.

this temper of mind a criminal and contemptible meanness, which must induce men to sacrifice the glory of their country, and their own honour, to a shameful pusillanimity ; and such it appears to almost all who are called Christians even at this day, who not only reject it in practice, but disavow it in principle, notwithstanding this explicit declaration of their Master. We see them revenging the smallest affronts by premeditated murder, as individuals, on principles of honour; and, in their national capacities, destroying each other with fire and sword, for the low considerations of commercial interests, the balance

F

of

of rival powers, or the ambition of princes : We see them with their last breath animating each other to a savage revenge, and, in the agonies of death, plunging with feeble arms their daggers into the hearts of their opponents: and, what is still worse, we hear all these barbarisms celebrated by historians, flattered by poets, applauded in theatres, approved in senates, and even sanctified in pulpits. But universal practice cannot alter the nature of things, nor universal error change the nature of truth : Pride was not made for man, but humility, meekness, and resignation, that is poor-ness of spirit, was made for man, and properly belongs to his dependent

dent and precarious situation ; and is the only disposition of mind, which can enable him to enjoy ease and quiet here, and happiness hereafter : Yet was this important precept intirely unknown until it was promulgated by him, who said,
 “ Suffer little children to come
 “ unto me, and forbid them not ;
 “ for of such is the kingdom of
 “ heaven : Verily I say unto you,
 “ whoever shall not receive the
 “ kingdom of God as a little child,
 “ he shall not enter therein*.”

Another precept, equally new and no less excellent, is forgiveness of injuries : “ Ye have heard,” says Christ to his disciples,

* Matt. x. 14.

“ Thou shalt love thy neighbour,
 “ and hate thine enemy; but I
 “ say unto you, love your enemies;
 “ bless them that curse you, do
 “ good to them that hate you,
 “ and pray for them which de-
 “ spitefully use you, and persecute
 “ you †” This was a lesson so
 new, and so utterly unknown, ’till
 taught by his doctrines, and en-
 forced by his example, that the
 wisest moralists of the wisest na-
 tions and ages represented the
 desire of revenge as a mark of a
 noble mind, and the accomplish-
 ment of it as one of the chief
 felicities attendant on a fortunate
 man. But how much more mag-

† Matt. v. 43.

nanimous,

nanimous, how much more beneficial to mankind, is forgiveness! it is more magnanimous, because every generous and exalted disposition of the human mind is requisite to the practice of it: for these alone can enable us to bear the wrongs and insults of wickedness and folly with patience, and to look down on the perpetrators of them with pity, rather than indignation; these alone can teach us, that such are but a part of those sufferings allotted to us in this state of probation, and to know, that to overcome evil with good, is the most glorious of all victories: it is the most beneficial, because this amiable conduct alone

can put an end to an eternal succession of injuries and retaliations; for every retaliation becomes a new injury, and requires another act of revenge for satisfaction. But would we observe this salutary precept, to love our enemies, and to do good to those who despitefully use us, this obstinate benevolence would at last conquer the most inveterate hearts, and we should have no enemies to forgive. How much more exalted a character therefore is a Christian martyr, suffering with resignation, and praying for the guilty, than that of a Pagan hero, breathing revenge, and destroying the innocent! Yet noble, and useful as
this

this virtue is, before the appearance of this religion it was not only unpractised, but decried in principle as mean and ignominious, though so obvious a remedy for most of the miseries of this life, and so necessary a qualification for the happiness of another.

A third precept, first noticed and first enjoined by this institution, is charity to all men. What this is, we may best learn from this admirable description, painted in the following words ; “ Charity
 “ suffereth long, and is kind ;
 “ charity envieth not ; charity
 “ vaunteth not itself ; is not puffed
 “ up ; doth not behave itself un-

“ seemly ; seeketh not her own ;
 “ is not easily provoked ; thinketh
 “ no evil ; rejoiceth not in ini-
 “ quity, but rejoiceth in truth ;
 “ feareth all things ; believeth all
 “ things ; hopeth all things ; en-
 “ dureth all things*.” Here we
 have an accurate delineation of this
 bright constellation of all virtues,
 which consists not, as many ima-
 gine, in the building of monaste-
 ries, endowment of hospitals, or
 the distribution of alms, but in
 such an amiable disposition of
 mind, as exercises itself every hour
 in acts of kindness, patience,
 complacency, and benevolence to
 all around us, and which alone is

* 1 Cor. xiii. 4.

able to promote happiness in the present life, or render us capable of receiving it in another : and yet this is totally new, and so it is declared to be by the author of it ;
 “ A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another ; as I have loved you, that ye love one another ; by this shall all men know, that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another*.” This benevolent disposition is made the great characteristic of a christian, the test of his obedience, and the mark by which he is to be distinguished. This love for each other is that charity just now described, and

* John xiii. 34.

contains all those qualities, which are there attributed to it; humility, patience, meekness, and beneficence : without which we must live in perpetual discord, and consequently cannot pay obedience to this commandment by loving one another; a commandment so sublime, so rational, and so beneficial, so wisely calculated to correct the depravity, diminish the wickedness, and abate the miseries of human nature, that, did we universally comply with it, we should soon be relieved from all the inquietudes arising from our own unruly passions, anger, envy, revenge, malice, and ambition, as well as from all those injuries, to which

which we are perpetually exposed from the indulgence of the same passions in others. It would also preserve our minds in such a state of tranquillity, and so prepare them for the kingdom of heaven, that we should slide out of a life of peace, love and benevolence, into that celestial society, by an almost imperceptible transition. Yet was this commandment intirely new, when given by him, who so intitles it, and has made it the capital duty of his religion, because the most indispensably necessary to the attainment of its great object, the kingdom of heaven ; into which if proud, turbulent and vindictive spirits
were

were permitted to enter, they must unavoidably destroy the happiness of that state by the operations of the same passions and vices, by which they disturb the present, and therefore all such must be eternally excluded, not only as a punishment, but also from incapacity.

Repentance, by this we plainly see, is another new moral duty strenuously insisted on by this religion, and by no other, because absolutely necessary to the accomplishment of its end; for this alone can purge us from those transgressions, from which we cannot be totally exempted in this state of trial and temptation, and purify us from
that

that depravity in our nature, which renders us incapable of attaining this end. Hence also we may learn, that no repentance can remove this incapacity, but such as intirely changes the nature and disposition of the offender; which in the language of Scripture is called “being born again.” Mere contrition for past crimes, nor even the pardon of them, cannot effect this, unless it operates to this intire conversion or new birth, as it is properly and emphatically named: for sorrow can no more purify a mind corrupted by a long continuance in vicious habits, than it can restore health to a body distempered

ed by a long course of vice and intemperance. Hence also every one, who is in the least acquainted with himself, may judge of the reasonableness of the hope that is in him, and of his situation in a future state by that of his present. If he feels in himself a temper proud, turbulent, vindictive, and malevolent, and a violent attachment to the pleasures or business of the world, he may be assured, that he must be excluded from the kingdom of heaven; not only because his conduct can merit no such reward, but because, if admitted, he would find there no objects satisfactory to his passions, inclinations, and pursuits,

and therefore could only disturb the happiness of others without enjoying any share of it himself.

Faith is another moral duty enjoined by this institution, of a species so new, that the philosophers of antiquity had no word expressive of this idea, nor any such idea to be expressed; for the word *πίστις* or *fides*, which we translate faith, was never used by any pagan writer in a sense the least similar to that, to which it is applied in the New Testament: where in general it signifies an humble, teachable, and candid disposition, a trust in God, and confidence in his promises; when applied particularly to christianity,

it

it means no more than a belief of this single proposition, that Christ was the son of God ; that is, in the language of those writings, the Messiah, who was foretold by the prophets, and expected by the Jews ; who was sent by God into the world to preach righteousness, judgment, and everlasting life, and to die as an atonement for the sins of mankind. This was all that Christ required to be believed by those who were willing to become his disciples: he, who does not believe this, is not a Christian, and he who does, believes the whole that is essential to his profession, and all that is properly comprehended under the name of faith.

This

This unfortunate word has indeed been so tortured and so misapplied to mean every absurdity, which artifice could impose upon ignorance, that it has lost all pretensions to the title of virtue ; but if brought back to the simplicity of its original signification, it well deserves that name, because it usually arises from the most amiable dispositions, and is always a direct contrast to pride, obstinacy, and self-conceit. If taken in the extensive sense of an assent to the evidence of things not seen, it comprehends the existence of a God, and a future state, and is therefore not only itself a moral virtue, but the source from whence

G

all

all others must proceed; for on the belief of these all religion and morality must intirely depend. It cannot be altogether void of moral merit; (as some would represent it) because it is in a degree voluntary; for daily experience shews us, that men not only pretend to, but actually do believe, and disbelieve almost any propositions, which best suit their interests, or inclinations, and unfeignedly change their sincere opinions with their situations and circumstances. For we have power over the mind's eye, as well as over the body's, to shut it against the strongest rays of truth and religion, whenever they become painful to us, and to open it

it again to the faint glimmerings of scepticism and infidelity when we "love darkness rather than light, "because our deeds are evil*." And this, I think, sufficiently refutes all objections to the moral nature of faith, drawn from the supposition of its being quite involuntary, and necessarily dependent on the degree of evidence, which is offered to our understandings.

Self-abasement is another moral duty inculcated by this religion only ; which requires us to impute even our own virtues to the grace and favour of our Creator, and to acknowledge, that we can do nothing good by our own powers, un-

* John iii. 19.

less assisted by his over-ruling influence: This doctrine seems at first sight to infringe on our free-will, and to deprive us of all merit; but, on a closer examination, the truth of it may be demonstrated both by reason and experience, and that in fact it does not impair the one, or depreciate the other: and that it is productive of so much humility, resignation, and dependance on God, that it justly claims a place amongst the most illustrious moral virtues. Yet was this duty utterly repugnant to the proud and self-sufficient principles of the antient philosophers as well as modern Deists, and therefore before the publication of the gospel totally

totally unknown and uncomprehended.

Detachment from the world is another moral virtue constituted by this religion alone: so new, that even at this day few of its professors can be persuaded, that it is required, or that it is any virtue at all. By this detachment from the world is not to be understood a seclusion from society, abstraction from all business, or retirement to a gloomy cloyster. Industry and labour, chearfulness and hospitality are frequently recommended: nor is the acquisition of wealth and honours prohibited, if they can be obtained by honest means, and a moderate degree

of attention and care: but such an unremitted anxiety, and perpetual application as engrosses our whole time and thoughts, are forbid, because they are incompatible with the spirit of this religion, and must utterly disqualify us for the attainment of its great end. We toil on in the vain pursuits and frivolous occupations of the world, die in our harness, and then expect, if no gigantic crime stands in the way, to step immediately into the kingdom of heaven: but this is impossible; for without a previous detachment from the business of this world, we cannot be prepared for the happiness of another. Yet this could make no part
of

of the morality of pagans, because their virtues were altogether connected with this business, and consisted chiefly in conducting it with honour to themselves, and benefit to the public: But Christianity has a nobler object in view, which, if not attended to, must be lost for ever. This object is that celestial mansion of which we should never lose sight, and to which we should be ever advancing during our journey thro' life: but this by no means precludes us from performing the business, or enjoying the amusements of travellers, provided they detain us not too long, or lead us too far out of our way.

It cannot be denied, that the great author of the christian institution, first and singly ventured to oppose all the chief principles of pagan virtue, and to introduce a religion directly opposite to those erroneous though long-established opinions, both in its duties and in its object. The most celebrated virtues of the ancients were high spirit, intrepid courage, and implacable resentment.

Impiger, iracundus, inexorabilis, acer,
 was the portrait of the most illustrious Hero, drawn by one of the first poets of antiquity: To all these admired qualities, those of a true Christian are an exact contrast; for this religion constantly
 enjoins

injoins poorness of spirit, meekness, patience, and forgiveness of injuries. “ But I say unto you, “ that ye resist not evil ; but who- “ ever shall smite thee on the “ right cheek, turn to him the “ other also *.” The favourite characters among the Pagans were the turbulent, ambitious, and intrepid, who through toils and dangers acquired wealth, and spent it in luxury, magnificence, and corruption ; but both these are equally adverse to the Christian system, which forbids all extraordinary efforts to obtain wealth, care to secure, or thought concerning the enjoyment of it. “ Lay

* Matt. v. 39.

“ not

“ not up for yourselves treasures
 “ on earth, &c.” “ Take no
 “ thought, saying, what shall we
 “ eat, or what shall we drink, or
 “ wherewithal shall we be cloath-
 “ ed? for after all these things do
 “ the Gentiles seek*.” The chief
 object of the Pagans was im-
 mortal fame: for this their poets
 sang, their heroes fought, and
 their patriots died; and this was
 hung out by their philosophers
 and legislators, as the great incite-
 ment to all noble and virtuous
 deeds. But what says the Christian
 Legislator to his disciples on this
 subject? “ Blessed are ye, when
 “ men shall revile you, and shall

* Matt. vi. 31.

“ say

“ say all manner of evil against
 “ you for my sake; rejoice, and
 “ be exceeding glad, for great is
 “ your reward in heaven*.” So
 widely different is the genius of
 the Pagan and Christian morality,
 that I will venture to affirm, that
 the most celebrated virtues of the
 former are more opposite to the
 spirit, and more inconsistent with
 the end of the latter, than even
 their most infamous vices; and
 that a Brutus wrenching vengeance
 out of his hands to whom alone it be-
 longs, by murdering the oppressor
 of his country, or a Cato murder-
 ing himself from an impatience of
 controul, leaves the world more

* Matt. v. 11.

unqualified for, and more inadmissible into the kingdom of heaven, than even a Messalina, or an Heliogabalus, with all their profligacy about them.

Nothing, I believe, has so much contributed to corrupt the true spirit of the Christian institution, as that partiality, which we contract from our earliest education for the manners of Pagan antiquity: from whence we learn to adopt every moral idea, which is repugnant to it; to applaud false virtues, which that disavows; to be guided by laws of honour, which that abhors; to imitate characters, which that detests; and to behold heroes, patriots, conquerors, and
 suicides

suicides with admiration, whose
 conduct that utterly condemns.
 From a coalition of these opposite
 principles was generated that mon-
 strous system of cruelty and bene-
 volence, of barbarism and civility,
 of rapine and justice, of fighting
 and devotion, of revenge and
 generosity, which harraressed the
 world for several centuries with
 crusades, holy wars, knight-
 errantry, and single combats, and
 even still retains influence enough,
 under the name of honour, to de-
 feat the most beneficent ends of
 this holy institution. I mean not
 by this to pass any censure on the
 principles of valour, patriotism, or
 honour: they may be useful, and
 perhaps

perhaps necessary, in the commerce and business of the present turbulent and imperfect state; and those who are actuated by them may be virtuous, honest, and even religious men: all that I assert is, that they cannot be Christians: A profligate may be a Christian, though a bad one, because he may be overpowered by passions and temptations, and his actions may contradict his principles; but a man, whose ruling principle is honour, however virtuous he may be, cannot be a Christian, because he erects a standard of duty, and deliberately adheres to it, diametrically opposite to the whole tenour of that religion.

The

The contrast between the Christian, and all other institutions religious or moral previous to its appearance, is sufficiently evident, and surely the superiority of the former is as little to be disputed; unless any one shall undertake to prove, that humility, patience, forgiveness, and benevolence are less amiable, and less beneficial qualities, than pride, turbulence, revenge, and malignity: that the contempt of riches is less noble, than the acquisition by fraud and villainy, or the distribution of them to the poor, less commendable than avarice or profusion; or that a real immortality in the kingdom of heaven is an object less exalted,

less rational, and less worthy of pursuit, than an imaginary immortality in the applause of men : that worthless tribute, which the folly of one part of mankind pays to the wickedness of the other ; a tribute, which a wise man ought always to despise, because a good man can scarce ever obtain.

CON-

CONCLUSION.

IF I mistake not, I have now fully established the truth of my three propositions.

First, That there is now extant a book intituled the New Testament.

Secondly, That from this book may be extracted a system of religion intirely new; both in its object, and its doctrines, not only superior to, but totally unlike every thing, which had ever before entered into the mind of man.

Thirdly, That from this book may likewise be collected a system

H of

of ethics, in which every moral precept founded on reason is carried to a higher degree of purity and perfection, than in any other of the wisest philosophers of preceding ages; every moral precept founded on false principles totally omitted, and many new precepts added, peculiarly corresponding with the new object of this religion.

Every one of these propositions, I am persuaded, is incontrovertibly true; and if true, this short, but certain conclusion must inevitably follow; That such a system of religion and morality could not possibly have been the work of any man, or set of men, much

less of those obscure, ignorant, and illiterate persons, who actually did discover, and publish it to the world; and that therefore it must have been effected by the supernatural interposition of divine power and wisdom; that is, that it must derive its origin from God.

This argument seems to me little short of demonstration, and is indeed founded on the very same reasoning, by which the material world is proved to be the work of his invisible hand. We view with admiration the heavens and the earth, and all therein contained; we contemplate with amazement the minute bodies of animals too

small for perception, and the immense planetary orbs too vast for imagination: We are certain that these cannot be the works of man; and therefore we conclude with reason, that they must be the productions of an omnipotent Creator. In the same manner we see here a scheme of religion and morality unlike and superior to all ideas of the human mind, equally impossible to have been discovered by the knowledge, as invented by the artifice of man; and therefore by the very same mode of reasoning, and with the same justice, we conclude, that it must derive its origin from the same omnipotent and omniscient Being.

Nor

Nor was the propagation of this religion less extraordinary than the religion itself, or less above the reach of all human power, than the discovery of it was above that of all human understanding. It is well known, that in the course of a very few years it was spread over all the principal parts of Asia and of Europe, and this by the ministry only of an inconsiderable number of the most inconsiderable persons; that at this time Paganism was in the highest repute, believed universally by the vulgar, and patronised by the great; that the wisest men of the wisest nations assisted at its sacrifices, and consulted its oracles on the most

important occasions : Whether these were the tricks of the priests or of the devil, is of no consequence, as they were both equally unlikely to be converted, or overcome ; the fact is certain, that on the preaching of a few fishermen, their altars were deserted, and their deities were dumb. This miracle they undoubtedly performed, whatever we may think of the rest : and this is surely sufficient to prove the authority of their commission ; and to convince us, that neither their undertaking nor the execution of it could possibly be their own.

How much this divine institution has been corrupted, or how soon

soon these corruptions began, how far it has been discoloured by the false notions of illiterate ages, or blended with fictions by pious frauds, or how early these notions and fictions were introduced, no learning or sagacity is now able precisely to ascertain; but surely no man, who seriously considers the excellence and novelty of its doctrines, the manner in which it was at first propagated through the world, the persons who achieved that wonderful work, and the originality of those writings in which it is still recorded, can possibly believe that it could ever have been the production of imposture, or chance; or that from

an imposture the most wicked and blasphemous, (for if an imposture, such it is,) all the religion and virtue now existing on earth can derive their source.

But notwithstanding what has been here urged, if any man can believe, that at a time when the literature of Greece and Rome, then in their meridian lustre, were insufficient for the task, the son of a carpenter, together with twelve of the meanest and most illiterate mechanics, his associates, unassisted by any supernatural power, should be able to discover or invent a system of theology the most sublime, and of ethics the most perfect, which had escaped the penetration

tration and learning of Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero; and that from this system, by their own sagacity, they had excluded every false virtue, though universally admired, and admitted every true virtue, though despised and ridiculed by all the rest of the world: If any one can believe that these men could become impostors, for no other purpose than the propagation of truth, villains for no end but to teach honesty, and martyrs without the least prospect of honour or advantage; or that, if all this should have been possible, these few inconsiderable persons should have been able, in the course of a few years, to have spread this
 their

their religion over most parts of the then known world, in opposition to the interests, pleasures, ambition, prejudices, and even reason of mankind; to have triumphed over the power of princes, the intrigues of states, the force of custom, the blindness of zeal, the influence of priests, the arguments of orators, and the philosophy of the world, without any supernatural assistance; if any one can believe all these miraculous events, contradictory to the constant experience of the powers and dispositions of human nature, he must be possessed of much more faith than is necessary to make him a Christian, and remain
an

an unbeliever from mere credulity.

But should these credulous infidels after all be in the right, and this pretended revelation be all a fable ; from believing it what harm could ensue ? Would it render princes more tyrannical, or subjects more ungovernable ? the rich more insolent, or the poor more disorderly ? Would it make worse parents or children, husbands or wives, masters or servants, friends or neighbours ? Or would it not make men more virtuous, and consequently more happy in every situation ? It could not be criminal ; it could not be detrimental. It could not be criminal, because
it

it cannot be a crime to assent to such evidence, as has been able to convince the best and wisest of mankind ; by which, if false, Providence must have permitted men to deceive each other, for the most beneficial ends, and which therefore it would be surely more meritorious to believe, from a disposition of faith and charity, which believeth all things, than to reject with scorn from obstinacy and self-conceit : It cannot be detrimental, because if Christianity is a fable, it is a fable, the belief of which is the only principle which can retain men in a steady and uniform course of virtue, piety, and devotion, or can support them
in

in the hour of distress, of sickness, and of death. Whatever might be the operations of true deism on the minds of pagan philosophers, that can now avail us nothing: for that light which once lightened the gentiles, is now absorbed in the brighter illumination of the gospel; we can now form no rational system of deism, but what must be borrowed from that source, and, as far as it reaches towards perfection, must be exactly the same; and therefore if we will not accept of Christianity, we can have no religion at all. Accordingly we see, that those who fly from this, scarce ever stop at deism; but hasten on with great alacrity to a total rejection

jection of all religious and moral principles whatever.

If I have here demonstrated the divine origin of the christian religion by an argument which cannot be confuted; no others, however plausible or numerous, founded on probabilities, doubts, and conjectures, can ever disprove it, because if it is once shewn to be true, it cannot be false. But as many arguments of this kind have bewildered some candid and ingenuous minds, I shall here bestow a few lines on those which have the most weight, in order to wipe out, or at least to diminish their perplexing influence.

But here I must previously observe,

serve, that the most unsurmountable, as well as the most usual obstacle to our belief, arises from our passions, appetites, and interests; for faith being an act of the will as much as of the understanding, we oftener disbelieve for want of inclination, than want of evidence. The first step towards thinking this revelation true, is our hopes that it is so; for whenever we much wish any proposition to be true, we are not far from believing it. It is certainly for the interest of all good men, that its authority should be well founded; and still more beneficial to the bad, if ever they intend to be better: because it is the only system

system either of reason or religion which can give them any assurance of pardon. The punishment of vice is a debt due to justice, which cannot be remitted without compensation: repentance can be no compensation; it may change a wicked man's dispositions, and prevent his offending for the future, but can lay no claim to pardon for what is past. If any one by profligacy and extravagance contracts a debt, repentance may make him wiser, and hinder him from running into further distresses, but can never pay off his old bonds; for which he must be ever accountable, unless they are discharged by himself, or some other
other

other in his stead: this very discharge Christianity alone holds forth on our repentance, and, if true, will certainly perform: the truth of it therefore must ardently be wished for by all, except the wicked, who are determined neither to repent or reform. It is well worth every man's while, who either is, or intends to be virtuous, to believe Christianity, if he can; because he will find it the surest preservative against all vicious habits and their attendant evils, the best resource under distresses and disappointments, ill health and ill fortune, and the firmest basis on which contemplation can rest; and without some, the

I

human

human mind is never perfectly at ease. But if any one is attached to a favourite pleasure, or eagerly engaged in worldly pursuits incompatible with the precepts of this religion, and he believes it, he must either relinquish those pursuits with uneasiness, or persist in them with remorse and dissatisfaction, and therefore must commence unbeliever in his own defence. With such I shall not dispute, nor pretend to persuade men by arguments to make themselves miserable : but to those, who, not afraid that this religion may be true, are really affected by such objections, I will offer the following answers, which,

which, though short, will, I doubt not, be sufficient to shew them their weakness and futility.

In the first place, then, some have been so bold as to strike at the root of all revelation from God, by asserting, that it is incredible, because unnecessary, and unnecessary, because the reason which he has bestowed on mankind is sufficiently able to discover all the religious and moral duties which he requires of them, if they would but attend to her precepts, and be guided by her friendly admonitions. Mankind have undoubtedly at various times from the remotest ages received so much knowledge by divine communications, and

have ever been so much inclined to impute it all to their own sufficiency, that it is now difficult to determine what human reason unassisted can effect: But to form a true judgment on this subject, let us turn our eyes to those remote regions of the globe, to which this supernatural assistance has never yet extended, and we shall there see men endued with sense and reason not inferior to our own, so far from being capable of forming systems of religion and morality, that they are at this day totally unable to make a nail or a hatchet: from whence we may surely be convinced, that reason alone is so far from being sufficient to offer
to

to mankind a perfect religion, that it has never yet been able to lead them to any degree of culture, or civilization whatever. These have uniformly flowed from that great fountain of divine communication opened in the east, in the earliest ages, and thence been gradually diffused in salubrious streams, throughout the various regions of the earth. Their rise and progress, by surveying the history of the world, may easily be traced backwards to their source; and wherever these have not as yet been able to penetrate, we there find the human species not only void of all true religious and moral sentiments, but not the least emerged

from their original ignorance and barbarity; which seems a demonstration, that although human reason is capable of progression in science, yet the first foundations must be laid by supernatural instructions: for surely no other probable cause can be assigned, why one part of mankind should have made such an amazing progress in religious, moral, metaphysical, and philosophical enquiries; such wonderful improvements in policy, legislation, commerce, and manufactures, while the other part, formed with the same natural capacities, and divided only by seas and mountains, should remain, during the same number of ages, in
a state

a state little superior to brutes, without government, without laws or letters, and even without clothes and habitations; murdering each other to satiate their revenge, and devouring each other to appease their hunger: I say no cause can be assigned for this amazing difference, except that the first have received information from those divine communications recorded in the scriptures, and the latter have never yet been favoured with such assistance. This remarkable contrast seems an unanswerable, though perhaps a new proof of the necessity of revelation, and a solid refutation of all arguments against it, drawn from the sufficiency of

human reason. And as reason in her natural state is thus incapable of making any progress in knowledge ; so when furnished with materials by supernatural aid, if left to the guidance of her own wild imaginations, she falls into more numerous, and more gross errors, than her own native ignorance could ever have suggested. There is then no absurdity so extravagant, which she is not ready to adopt : she has persuaded some, that there is no God ; others, that there can be no future state : she has taught some, that there is no difference between vice and virtue, and that to cut a man's throat and to relieve his necessities are actions equally meritorious :

torious: she has convinced many,
 that they have no free-will in op-
 position to their own experience;
 some, that there can be no such
 thing as soul, or spirit, contrary to
 their own perceptions; and others,
 no such thing as matter or body,
 in contradiction to their senses. By
 analysing all things she can shew,
 that there is nothing in any thing;
 by perpetual sifting she can reduce
 all existence to the invisible dust of
 scepticism; and by recurring to first
 principles, prove to the satisfaction
 of her followers, that there are no
 principles at all. How far such a
 guide is to be depended on in the
 important concerns of religion, and
 morals, I leave to the judgment of
 every

every considerate man to determine.

This is certain, that human reason in its highest state of cultivation amongst the philosophers of Greece and Rome, was never able to form a religion comparable to Christianity; nor have all those sources of moral virtue, such as truth, beauty, and the fitness of things, which modern philosophers have endeavoured to substitute in its stead, ever been effectual to produce good men, and have themselves often been the productions of some of the worst.

Others there are, who allow, that a revelation from God may be both necessary, and credible; but alledge, that the scriptures, that is
the

the books of the Old and New Testament, cannot be that Revelation; because in them are to be found errors and inconsistencies, fabulous stories, false facts, and false philosophy; which can never be derived from the fountain of all wisdom and truth. To this I reply, that I readily acknowledge, that the scriptures are not revelations from God, but the history of them: The revelation itself is derived from God; but the history of it is the production of men, and therefore the truth of it is not in the least affected by their fallibility, but depends on the internal evidence of its own supernatural excellence. If in these books such a religion,

religion, as has been here described, actually exists, no seeming, or even real defects to be found in them can disprove the divine origin of this religion, or invalidate my argument. Let us, for instance, grant that the Mosaic history of the creation was founded on the erroneous but popular principles of those early ages, who imagined the earth to be a vast plain, and the celestial bodies no more than luminaries hung up in the concave firmament to enlighten it; will it from thence follow, that Moses could not be a proper instrument in the hands of Providence, to impart to the Jews a divine law, because he was not inspired with a
fore-

fore-knowledge of the Copernican and Newtonian systems? or that Christ must be an impostor, because Moses was not an astronomer? Let us also suppose, that the accounts of Christ's temptation in the wilderness, the devil's taking refuge in the herd of swine, with several other narrations in the New Testament, frequently ridiculed by unbelievers, were all but stories accommodated to the ignorance and superstitions of the times and countries in which they were written, or pious frauds intended to impress on vulgar minds a higher reverence of the power and sanctity of Christ; will this in the least impeach the excellence of his religion,

ligion, or the authority of its founder? or is Christianity answerable for all the fables of which it may have been the innocent occasion? The want of this obvious distinction has much injured the Christian cause; because on this ground it has ever been most successfully attacked, and on this ground it is not easily to be defended: for if the records of this revelation are supposed to be the revelation itself, the least defect discovered in them must be fatal to the whole. What has led many to overlook this distinction, is that common phrase, that the scriptures are the word of God; and in one sense they certainly are; that is, they are the sacred

sacred repository of all the revelations, dispensations, promises, and precepts, which God has vouchsafed to communicate to mankind; but by this expression we are not to understand, that every part of this voluminous collection of historical, poetical, prophetical, theological, and moral writings, which we call the Bible, was dictated by the immediate influence of divine inspiration: The authors of these books pretend to no such infallibility, and if they claim it not for themselves, who has authority to claim it for them? Christ required no such belief from those who were willing to be his disciples. He says, "He
 " that believeth on me, hath ever-
 " lasting

“lasting life * ;” but where does he say, He that believeth not every word contained in the Old Testament, which was then extant, or every word in the New Testament, which was to be wrote for the instruction of future generations, hath not everlasting life ? There are innumerable occurrences related in the scriptures, some of greater, some of less, and some of no importance at all ; the truth of which we can have no reason to question, but the belief of them is surely not essential to the faith of a Christian : I have no doubt but that St. Paul was shipwrecked, and that he left his cloak

* John vi. 47.

and

and his parchments at Troas ; but the belief of these facts makes no part of Christianity, nor is the truth of them any proof of its authority. It proves only that this apostle could not in common life be under the perpetual influence of infallible inspiration ; for, had he been so, he would not have put to sea before a storm, nor have forgot his cloak. These writers were undoubtedly directed by supernatural influence in all things necessary to the great work, which they were appointed to perform : At particular times, and on particular occasions, they were enabled to utter prophecies, to speak languages, and to work miracles ; but in all other

K circum-

circumstances, they seem to have been left to the direction of their own understandings, like other men. In the sciences of history, geography, astronomy, and philosophy, they appear to have been no better instructed than others, and therefore were not less liable to be misled by the errors and prejudices of the times and countries in which they lived. They related facts like honest men, to the best of their knowledge or information, and they recorded the divine lessons of their master with the utmost fidelity; but they pretended to no infallibility, for they sometimes differed in their relations, and they sometimes disagreed

agreed in their sentiments. All which proves only, that they did not act, or write, in a combination to deceive, but not in the least impeaches the truth of the revelation which they published; which depends not on any external evidence whatever: For I will venture to affirm, that if any one could prove, what is impossible to be proved, because it is not true, that there are errors in geography, chronology, and philosophy, in every page of the Bible; that the prophecies therein delivered are all but fortunate guesses, or artful applications, and the miracles there recorded no better than legendary tales: if any one could shew, that

circumstances, they seem to have been left to the direction of their own understandings, like other men. In the sciences of history, geography, astronomy, and philosophy, they appear to have been no better instructed than others, and therefore were not less liable to be misled by the errors and prejudices of the times and countries in which they lived. They related facts like honest men, to the best of their knowledge or information, and they recorded the divine lessons of their master with the utmost fidelity; but they pretended to no infallibility, for they sometimes differed in their relations, and they sometimes disagreed

agreed in their sentiments. All which proves only, that they did not act, or write, in a combination to deceive, but not in the least impeaches the truth of the revelation which they published; which depends not on any external evidence whatever: For I will venture to affirm, that if any one could prove, what is impossible to be proved, because it is not true, that there are errors in geography, chronology, and philosophy, in every page of the Bible; that the prophecies therein delivered are all but fortunate guesses, or artful applications, and the miracles there recorded no better than legendary tales: if any one could shew, that

these books were never written by their pretended authors, but were posterior impositions on illiterate and credulous ages: all these wonderful discoveries would prove no more than this, that God, for reasons to us unknown, had thought proper to permit a revelation by him communicated to mankind, to be mixed with their ignorance, and corrupted by their frauds from its earliest infancy, in the same manner in which he has visibly permitted it to be mixed, and corrupted from that period to the present hour. If in these books a religion superior to all human imagination actually exists, it is of no consequence to the proof of
its

its divine origin, by what means it was there introduced, or with what human errors and imperfections it is blended. A diamond, though found in a bed of mud, is still a diamond, nor can the dirt, which furrounds it, depreciate its value or destroy its lustre.

To some speculative and refined observers, it has appeared incredible, that a wise and benevolent Creator should have constituted a world upon one plan, and a religion for it on another; that is, that he should have revealed a religion to mankind, which not only contradicts the principal passions and inclinations which he has implanted in their natures, but

is incompatible with the whole œconomy of that world which he has created, and in which he has thought proper to place them. This, say they, with regard to the Christian is apparently the case: the love of power, riches, honour, and fame, are the great incitements to generous and magnanimous actions; yet by this institution are all these depreciated and discouraged. Government is essential to the nature of man, and cannot be managed without certain degrees of violence, corruption, and imposition; yet are all these strictly forbid. Nations cannot subsist without wars, nor war be carried on without rapine,

pine,

pine, desolation, and murder; yet are these prohibited under the severest threats. The non-resistance of evil must subject individuals to continual oppressions, and leave nations a defenceless prey to their enemies; yet is this recommended. Perpetual patience under insults and injuries must every day provoke new insults and new injuries; yet is this enjoined. A neglect of all we eat and drink and wear, must put an end to all commerce, manufactures, and industry; yet is this required. In short, were these precepts universally obeyed, the disposition of all human affairs must be intirely changed, and the business of the

world, constituted as it now is, could not go on. To all this I answer, that such indeed is the christian revelation, though some of its advocates may perhaps be unwilling to own it, and such it is constantly declared to be by him who gave it, as well as by those, who published it under his immediate direction: To these he says, " If ye were of the world, the world would love his own; but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you *." To the Jews he declares, " Ye are of this world; I am not of this world †." St. Paul writes to the Romans,

* John xv. 19. † John viii. 23.

" Be

“ Be not conformed to this
 “ world * ;” and to the Corin-
 “ thians, “ We speak not the
 “ wisdom of this world † .” St.
 James says, “ Know ye not, that
 “ the friendship of the world is
 “ enmity with God ? whosoever
 “ therefore will be a friend of the
 “ world is the enemy of God ‡ .”

This irreconcilable disagreement between christianity and the world is announced in numberless other places in the New Testament, and indeed by the whole tenour of those writings. These are plain declarations, which, in spite of all the evasions of those good managers, who choose to take a little

* Rom. xii. 2. † Cor. ii. 6. ‡ Jam. iv. 4.

of this world in their way to heaven, stand fixed and immovable against all their arguments drawn from public benefit and pretended necessity, and must ever forbid any reconciliation between the pursuits of this world and the christian institution : But they who reject it on this account, enter not into the sublime spirit of this religion, which is not a code of precise laws designed for the well-ordering society, adapted to the ends of worldly convenience, and amenable to the tribunal of human prudence ; but a divine lesson of purity and perfection, so far superior to the low considerations of conquest, government, and commerce,

merce, that it takes no more notice of them, than of the battles of game-cocks, the policy of bees, or the industry of ants: they recollect not what is the first and principal object of this institution; that this is not, as has been often repeated, to make us happy, or even virtuous in the present life, for the sake of augmenting our happiness here, but to conduct us through a state of dangers and sufferings, of sin and temptation, in such a manner as to qualify us for the enjoyment of happiness hereafter. All other institutions of religion and morals were made for the world, but the characteristic of this is to be against it; and therefore

therefore the merits of christian doctrines are not to be weighed in the scales of public utility, like those of moral precepts, because worldly utility is not their end. If Christ and his apostles had pretended, that the religion which they preached would advance the power, wealth, and prosperity of nations, or of men, they would have deserved but little credit; but they constantly profess the contrary, and every where declare, that their religion is adverse to the world, and all its pursuits. Christ says, speaking of his disciples, " They are not of the world, even " as I am not of the world *." It

* John xvii. 16.

can therefore be no imputation on this religion, or on any of its precepts, that they tend not to an end which their author professedly disclaims: nor can it surely be deemed a defect, that it is adverse to the vain pursuits of this world; for so are reason, wisdom, and experience; they all teach us the same lesson, they all demonstrate to us every day, that these are begun on false hopes, carried on with disquietude, and end in disappointment. This professed incompatibility with the little, wretched, and iniquitous business of the world, is therefore so far from being a defect in this religion, that, was there no other proof of its

its divine origin, this alone, I think, would be abundantly sufficient. The great plan and benevolent design of this dispensation is plainly this; to enlighten the minds, purify the religion, and amend the morals of mankind in general, and to select the most meritorious of them to be successively transplanted into the kingdom of heaven: Which gracious offer is impartially tendered to all, who by perseverance in meekness, patience, piety, charity, and a detachment from the world, are willing to qualify themselves for this holy and happy society. Was this universally accepted, and did every man observe strictly every precept
of

of the gospel, the face of human affairs and the œconomy of the world would indeed be greatly changed; but surely they would be changed for the better; and we should enjoy much more happiness, even here, than at present: For we must not forget, that evils are by it forbid as well as resistance; injuries, as well as revenge; all unwillingness to diffuse the enjoyments of life, as well as sollicitude to acquire them; all obstacles to ambition, as well as ambition itself; and therefore all contentions for power and interest would be at an end; and the world would go on much more happily than it now does. But
this

this universal acceptance of such an offer was never expected from so depraved and imperfect a creature as man, and therefore could never have been any part of the design : For it was foreknown and foretold by him who made it ; that few, very few would accept it on these terms. He says, “ Strait “ is the gate, and narrow is the “ way which leadeth into life, and “ few there be that find it* :” Accordingly we see, that very few are prevailed on by the hopes of future happiness, to relinquish the pursuits of present pleasures or interests, and therefore these pursuits are little interrupted by the se-

* Matt. vii. 4.

cession

cession of so inconsiderable a number: As the natural world subsists by the struggles of the same elements, so does the moral by the contentions of the same passions, as from the beginning: The generality of mankind are actuated by the same motives, fight, scuffle, and scramble for power, riches, and pleasures with the same eagerness: all occupations and professions are exercised with the same alacrity, and there are soldiers, lawyers, statesmen, patriots, and politicians, just as if Christianity had never existed. Thus, we see this wonderful dispensation has answered all the purposes for which it was intended: It has enlightened the

L minds,

minds, purified the religion, and amended the morals of mankind; and, without subverting the constitution, policy, or business of the world, opened a gate, though a strait one, through which all, who are wise enough to choose it, and good enough to be fit for it, may find an entrance into the kingdom of heaven.

Others have said, that if this revelation had really been from God, his infinite power and goodness could never have suffered it to have been so soon perverted from its original purity, to have continued in a state of corruption through the course of so many ages, and at last to have proved so ineffectual to the

5 reformation

reformation of mankind. To these I answer, that all this, on examination, will be found inevitable, from the nature of all revelations communicated to so imperfect a creature as man, and from circumstances peculiar to the rise and progress of the Christian in particular : for when this was first preached to the gentile nations, though they were not able to withstand the force of its evidence, and therefore received it ; yet they could not be prevailed on to relinquish their old superstitions, and former opinions, but chose rather to incorporate them with it : By which means it was necessarily mixed with their ignorance, and their

L 2 learning ;

learning; by both which it was equally injured. The people defaced its worship by blending it with their idolatrous ceremonies, and the philosophers corrupted its doctrines by weaving them up with the notions of the Gnostics, Mystics, and Manichæans, the prevailing systems of those times. By degrees its irresistible excellence gained over princes, potentates, and conquerors to its interests, and it was supported by their patronage: but that patronage soon engaged it in their policies and contests, and destroyed that excellence by which it had been acquired. At length the meek and humble professors of the gospel
inlaved

inflaved these princes, and conquered these conquerors their patrons, and erected for themselves such a stupendous fabric of wealth and power, as the world had never seen: they then propagated their religion by the same methods, by which it had been persecuted; nations were converted by fire and sword, and the vanquished were baptized with daggers at their throats. All these events we see proceed from a chain of causes and consequences, which could not have been broken without changing the established course of things by a constant series of miracles, or a total alteration of human nature: whilst that continues as it is, the purest

L 3 religion

religion must be corrupted by a conjunction with power and riches, and it will also then appear to be much more corrupted than it really is: because many are inclined to think, that every deviation from its primitive state is a corruption: Christianity was at first preached by the poor and mean, in holes and caverns, under the iron rod of persecution, and therefore many absurdly conclude, that any degree of wealth or power in its ministers, or of magnificence in its worship, are corruptions inconsistent with the genuine simplicity of its original state: they are offended, that modern bishops should possess titles, palaces, revenues, and coaches, when

when it is notorious, that their predecessors the apostles were despicable wanderers, without houses, or money, and walked on foot. The apostles indeed lived in a state of poverty and persecution attendant on their particular situation, and the work which they had undertaken: this was their misfortune, but no part of their religion, and therefore it can be no more incumbent on their successors to imitate their poverty and meanness, than to be whipped, imprisoned, and put to death, in compliance with their example. These are all but the suggestions of envy and malevolence, but no objections to these fortunate alte-

rations in Christianity and its professors; which, if not abused to the purposes of tyranny and superstition, are in fact no more than the necessary and proper effects of its more prosperous situation. When a poor man grows rich, or a servant becomes a master, they should take care that their exaltation prompts them not to be unjust or insolent; but surely it is not requisite or right, that their behaviour and mode of living should be exactly the same, when their situation is altered. How far this institution has been effectual to the reformation of mankind, it is not easy now to ascertain, because the enormities which prevailed

vailed before the appearance of it
 are by time so far removed from
 our sight, that they are scarcely
 visible; but those of the most
 gigantic size still remain in the re-
 cords of history, as monuments of
 the rest: Wars in those ages were
 carried on with a ferocity and cruelty
 unknown to the present: whole cities
 and nations were extirpated by fire
 and sword; and thousands of the van-
 quished were crucified and impaled
 for having endeavoured only to de-
 fend themselves and their country.
 The lives of new-born infants were
 then intirely at the disposal of their
 parents, who were at liberty to
 bring them up, or to expose them
 to perish by cold and hunger, or to
 be

be devoured by birds and beasts; and this was frequently practised without punishment, and even without censure. Gladiators were employed by hundreds to cut one another to pieces in public theatres for the diversion of the most polite assemblies; and though these combatants at first consisted of criminals only, by degrees men of the highest rank, and even ladies of the most illustrious families, enrolled themselves in this honourable list. On many occasions human sacrifices were ordained; and at the funerals of rich and eminent persons, great numbers of their slaves were murdered as victims pleasing to their departed spirits.

spirits. The most infamous obscenities were made part of their religious worship, and the most unnatural lusts publicly avowed, and celebrated by their most admired poets. At the approach of Christianity all these horrid abominations vanished; and amongst those who first embraced it, scarce a single vice was to be found: to such an amazing degree of piety, charity, temperance, patience, and resignation were the primitive converts exalted, that they seem literally to have been regenerated, and purified from all the imperfections of human nature; and to have pursued such a constant and uniform course of devotion, innocence,

nocence, and virtue, as, in the present times, it is almost as difficult for us to conceive as to imitate. If it is asked, why should not the belief of the same religion now produce the same effects? the answer is short, because it is not believed: The most sovereign medicine can perform no cure, if the patient will not be persuaded to take it. Yet notwithstanding all impediments, it has certainly done a great deal towards diminishing the vices and correcting the dispositions of mankind; and was it universally adopted in belief and practice, would totally eradicate both sin and punishment. But this was never expected, or designed, or possible,

possible, because, if their existence did not arise from some necessity to us unknown, they never would have been permitted to exist at all; and therefore they can no more be extirpated, than they could have been prevented: for this would certainly be incompatible with the frame and constitution of this world, and in all probability with that of another. And this, I think, well accounts for that reserve and obscurity with which this religion was at first promulgated, and that want of irresistible evidence of its truth, by which it might possibly have been enforced. Christ says to his disciples, “ To you it is
 “ given to know the mystery of
 “ the

“ the kingdom of God ; but unto
 “ them that are without, all these
 “ things are done in parables ;
 “ that seeing they may see, and not
 “ perceive, and hearing they may
 “ hear, and not understand ; lest
 “ at any time they should be con-
 “ verted, and their sins should be
 “ forgiven them *.” That is, to
 you by peculiar favour it is given
 to know and understand the doc-
 trines of my religion, and by that
 means to qualify yourselves for the
 kingdom of heaven ; but to the
 multitude without, that is to all
 mankind in general, this indul-
 gence cannot be extended ; because
 that all men should be exempted

* Mark iv. 11, 12.

from

from sin and punishment is utterly repugnant to the universal system, and that constitution of things, which infinite wisdom has thought proper to adopt.

Objections have likewise been raised to the divine authority of this religion from the incredibility of some of its doctrines, particularly of those concerning the Trinity, and atonement for sin by the sufferings and death of Christ; the one contradicting all the principles of human reason, and the other all our ideas of divine justice. To these objections I shall only say, that no arguments founded on principles, which we cannot comprehend, can possibly disprove a proposition already

already proved on principles which we do understand; and therefore that on this subject they ought not to be attended to: That three Beings should be one Being, is a proposition which certainly contradicts reason, that is, *our* reason; but it does not from thence follow, that it cannot be true; for there are many propositions which contradict our reason, and yet are demonstrably true: one is the very first principle of all religion, the being of a God; for that any thing should exist without a cause, or that any thing should be the cause of its own existence, are propositions equally contradictory to our reason; yet one of them must be true,

true or nothing could ever have existed: in like manner the overruling grace of the Creator, and the free-will of his creatures, his certain fore-knowledge of future events, and the uncertain contingency of those events, are to our apprehensions absolute contradictions to each other; and yet the truth of every one of these is demonstrable from Scripture, reason, and experience. All these difficulties arise from our imagining, that the mode of existence of all Beings must be similar to our own; that is, that they must all exist in time, and space; and hence proceeds our embarrassment on this subject. We know, that no two Beings, with whose

M

mode

mode of existence we are acquainted, can exist in the same point of time in the same point of space, and that therefore they cannot be one: but how far Beings, whose mode of existence bears no relation to time or space, may be united, we cannot comprehend: and therefore the possibility of such an union we cannot positively deny. In like manner our reason informs us, that the punishment of the innocent, instead of the guilty, is diametrically opposite to justice, rectitude, and all pretensions to utility; but we should also remember, that the short line of our reason cannot reach to the bottom of this question: it cannot inform us, by what means

means either guilt or punishment ever gained a place in the works of a Creator infinitely good and powerful, whose goodness must have induced him, and whose power must have enabled him to exclude them: It cannot assure us, that some sufferings of individuals are not necessary to the happiness and well-being of the whole: It cannot convince us, that they do not actually arise from this necessity, or that, for this cause, they may not be required of us, and levied like a tax for the public benefit; or that this tax may not be paid by one Being, as well as another; and therefore, if voluntarily offered, be justly accepted

from the innocent instead of the guilty. Of all these circumstances we are totally ignorant; nor can our reason afford us any information, and therefore we are not able to assert, that this measure is contrary to justice, or void of utility: for, unless we could first resolve that great question, whence came evil? we can decide nothing on the dispensations of Providence; because they must necessarily be connected with that undiscoverable principle; and, as we know not the root of the disease, we cannot judge of what is, or is not, a proper and effectual remedy. It is remarkable, that, notwithstanding all the seeming absurdities of this doctrine,

doctrine, there is one circumstance much in its favour; which is, that it has been universally adopted in all ages, as far as history can carry us back in our inquiries to the earliest times; in which we find all nations civilized and barbarous, however differing in all other religious opinions, agreeing alone in the expediency of appeasing their offended Deities by sacrifices, that is, by the vicarious sufferings of men or other animals. This notion could never have been derived from reason, because it directly contradicts it; nor from ignorance, because ignorance could never have contrived so unaccountable an expedient, nor have been uniform in

all ages and countries in any opinion whatsoever; nor from the artifice of kings or priests, in order to acquire dominion over the people, because it seems not adapted to this end, and we find it implanted in the minds of the most remote savages at this day discovered, who have neither kings or priests artifice, or dominion amongst them. It must therefore be deriyed from natural instinct, or supernatural revelation, both which are equally the operations of divine power. If it is further urged, that however true these doctrines may be, yet it must be inconsistent with the justice and goodness of the Creator, to require from his creatures

tures the belief of propositions which contradict, or are above the reach of that reason, which he has thought proper to bestow upon them. To this I answer, that genuine Christianity requires no such belief: It has discovered to us many important truths, with which we were before intirely unacquainted, and amongst them are these, that three Beings are some-way united in the divine essence, and that God will accept of the sufferings of Christ as an atonement for the sins of mankind. These, considered as declarations of facts only, neither contradict, or are above the reach of human reason: The first is a proposition as

plain, as that three equilateral lines compose one triangle; the other is as intelligible, as that one man should discharge the debts of another. In what manner this union is formed, or why God accepts these vicarious punishments, or to what purposes they may be subservient, it informs us not, because no information could enable us to comprehend these mysteries, and therefore it does not require that we should know or believe any thing about them. The truth of these doctrines must rest entirely on the authority of those who taught them; but then we should reflect that those were the same persons who taught us a system

system of religion more sublime, and of ethics more perfect, than any which our faculties were ever able to discover, but which when discovered are exactly consonant to our reason, and that therefore we should not hastily reject those informations which they have vouchsafed to give us, of which our reason is not a competent judge. If an able mathematician proves to us the truth of several propositions by demonstrations which we understand, we hesitate not on his authority to assent to others, the process of whose proofs we are not able to follow: why therefore should we refuse that credit to Christ and his Apostles, which we think

think reasonable to give to one another ?

Many have objected to the whole scheme of this revelation as partial, fluctuating, indeterminate, unjust, and unworthy of an omniscient and omnipotent author, who cannot be supposed to have favoured particular persons, countries, and times, with this divine communication, while others no less meritorious have been altogether excluded from its benefits; nor to have changed and counteracted his own designs; that is, to have formed mankind able and disposed to render themselves miserable by their own wickedness, and then to have contrived so
 strange

strange an expedient to restore them to that happiness, which they need never have been permitted to forfeit ; and this to be brought about by the unnecessary interposition of a mediator. To all this I shall only say, that however unaccountable this may appear to us, who see but as small a part of the Christian, as of the universal plan of creation, they are both in regard to all these circumstances exactly analogous to each other. In all the dispensations of Providence, with which we are acquainted, benefits are distributed in a similar manner ; health and strength, sense and science, wealth and power, are all bestowed on

individuals and communities in different degrees and at different times. The whole œconomy of this world consists of evils and remedies; and these for the most part administered by the instrumentality of intermediate agents. God has permitted us to plunge ourselves into poverty, distress, and misery, by our own vices, and has afforded us the advice, instructions, and examples of others, to deter or extricate us from these calamities. He has formed us subject to innumerable diseases, and he has bestowed on us a variety of remedies. He has made us liable to hunger, thirst, and nakedness, and he supplies us with
food,

food, drink, and cloathing, usually by the administration of others. He has created poisons, and he has provided antidotes. He has ordained the winter's cold to cure the pestilential heats of the summer, and the summer's sunshine to dry up the inundations of the winter. Why the constitution of nature is so formed, why all the visible dispensations of Providence are such, and why such is the Christian dispensation also, we know not, nor have faculties to comprehend. God might certainly have made the material world a system of perfect beauty and regularity, without evils, and without remedies; and the Christian dispensation a scheme

only of moral virtue productive of happiness, without the intervention of any atonement or mediation. He might have exempted our bodies from all diseases, and our minds from all depravity, and we should then have stood in no need of medicines to restore us to health, or expedients to reconcile us to his favour. It seems indeed to our ignorance, that this would have been more consistent with justice and reason; but his infinite wisdom has decided in another manner, and formed the systems both of Nature and Christianity on other principles, and these so exactly similar, that we have cause to conclude that they both must proceed

proceed from the same source of divine power and wisdom, however inconsistent with our reason they may appear. Reason is undoubtedly our surest guide in all matters, which lie within the narrow circle of her intelligence : On the subject of revelation her province is only to examine into its authority, and when that is once proved, she has no more to do, but to acquiesce in its doctrines, and therefore is never so ill employed, as when she pretends to accommodate them to her own ideas of rectitude and truth. God, says this self-sufficient teacher, is perfectly wise, just, and good ; and what is the inference ? That all his dispensations must be
con-

conformable to our notions of perfect wisdom, justice, and goodness : but it should first be proved, that man is as perfect, and as wise as his Creator, or this consequence will by no means follow ; but rather the reverse, that is, that the dispensations of a perfect and all-wise Being must probably appear unreasonable, and perhaps unjust, to a Being imperfect and ignorant ; and therefore their seeming impossibility may be a mark of their truth, and in some measure justify that pious rant of a mad enthusiast, “ Credo, quia impossibile.” Nor is it the least surprising, that we are not able to understand the spiritual dispensations of the Almighty,

mighty, when his material works are to us no less incomprehensible, our reason can afford us no insight into those great properties of matter, gravitation, attraction, elasticity, and electricity, nor even into the essence of matter itself: Can reason teach us how the sun's luminous orb can fill a circle, whose diameter contains many millions of miles, with a constant inundation of successive rays during thousands of years, without any perceivable diminution of that body, from whence they are continually poured, or any augmentation of those bodies on which they fall, and by which they are constantly absorbed? Can

N

reason

reason tell us how those rays, darted with a velocity greater than that of a cannon ball, can strike the tenderest organs of the human frame without inflicting any degree of pain, or by what means this percussion only can convey the forms of distant objects to an immaterial mind? or how any union can be formed between material and immaterial essences, or how the wounds of the body can give pain to the soul, or the anxiety of the soul can emaciate and destroy the body? That all these things are so, we have visible and indisputable demonstration; but how they can be so, is to us as incomprehensible, as the most abstruse

abstruse mysteries of Revelation can possibly be. In short, we see so small a part of the great Whole, we know so little of the relation, which the present life bears to pre-existent and future states; we can conceive so little of the nature of God, and his attributes, or mode of existence; we can comprehend so little of the material, and so much less of the moral plan on which the universe is constituted, or on what principle it proceeds, that, if a revelation from such a Being, on such subjects, was in every part familiar to our understandings, and consonant to our reason; we should have great cause to suspect its divine authority; and therefore, had this

revelation been less incomprehensible, it would certainly have been more incredible.

But I shall not enter further into the consideration of these abstruse and difficult speculations, because the discussion of them would render this short essay too tedious and laborious a task for the perusal of them, for whom it was principally intended; which are all those busy or idle persons, whose time and thoughts are wholly engrossed by the pursuits of business, or pleasure, ambition, or luxury, who know nothing of this religion, except what they have accidentally picked up by desultory conversation or superficial reading, and
have

have thence determined with themselves, that a pretended revelation founded on so strange and improbable a story, so contradictory to reason, so adverse to the world and all its occupations, so incredible in its doctrines, and in its precepts so impracticable, can be nothing more than the imposition of priestcraft upon ignorant and illiterate ages, and artfully continued as an engine well-adapted to awe and govern the superstitious vulgar. To talk to such about the Christian religion, is to converse with the deaf concerning music, or with the blind on the beauties of painting: They want all ideas relative to the subject,

and therefore can never be made to comprehend it: to enable them to do this, their minds must be formed for these conceptions by contemplation, retirement, and abstraction from business and dissipation, by ill-health, disappointments, and distresses; and possibly by divine interposition, or by enthusiasm, which is usually mistaken for it. Without some of these preparatory aids, together with a competent degree of learning and application, it is impossible that they can think or know, understand or believe, any thing about it. If they profess to believe, they deceive others; if they fancy that they believe, they deceive themselves.

selves. I am ready to acknowledge, that these gentlemen, as far as their information reaches, are perfectly in the right; and if they are endued with good understandings, which have been intirely devoted to the business or amusements of the world, they can pass no other judgment, and must revolt from the history and doctrines of this religion. "The preaching Christ crucified was to the Jews a
 "stumbling-block, and to the
 "Greeks foolishness* ; and so it must appear to all, who, like them, judge from established prejudices, false learning, and superficial knowledge; for those who are

* 1 Cor. i. 26.

quite unable to follow the chain of its prophecy, to see the beauty and justness of its moral precepts, and to enter into the wonders of its dispensations, can form no other idea of this revelation, but that of a confused rhapsody of fictions and absurdities.

If it is asked, Was Christianity then intended only for learned divines and profound philosophers? I answer, No : it was at first preached by the illiterate, and received by the ignorant ; and to such are the practical, which are the most necessary parts of it sufficiently intelligible: but the proofs of its authority undoubtedly are not, because these must be chiefly drawn
from

from other parts, of a speculative nature, opening to our inquiries inexhaustible discoveries concerning the nature, attributes, and dispensations of God, which cannot be understood without some learning and much attention. From these the generality of mankind must necessarily be excluded, and must therefore trust to others for the grounds of their belief, if they believe at all. And hence perhaps it is, that faith, or easiness of belief, is so frequently and so strongly recommended in the gospel; because if men require proofs, of which they themselves are incapable, and those who have no knowledge on this important subject

ject will not place some confidence in those who have ; the illiterate and unattentive must ever continue in a state of unbelief : but then all such should remember, that in all sciences, even in mathematics themselves, there are many propositions, which on a cursory view appear to the most acute understandings uninstructed in that science, to be impossible to be true, which yet on a closer examination are found to be truths capable of the strictest demonstration ; and that therefore in disquisitions on which we cannot determine without much learned investigation, reason uninformed is by no means to be depended on ;

and from hence they ought surely to conclude, that it may be at least as possible for them to be mistaken in disbelieving this revelation, who know nothing of the matter, as for those great masters of reason and erudition Grotius, Bacon, Newton, Boyle, Locke, Addifon, and Lyttelton, to be deceived in their belief: a belief, to which they firmly adhered after the most diligent and learned researches into the authenticity of its records, the completion of the prophecies, the sublimity of its doctrines, the purity of its precepts, and the arguments of its adversaries; a belief, which they have testified to the world by their writings, without

but any other motive, than their regard for truth and the benefit of mankind. Should the few foregoing pages add but one mite to the treasures with which these learned writers have enriched the world; if they should be so fortunate as to persuade any of these minute philosophers to place some confidence in these great opinions, and to distrust their own; if they should be able to convince them, that notwithstanding all unfavourable appearances, Christianity may not be altogether artifice and error; if they should prevail on them to examine it with some attention, or, if that is too much trouble, not to reject it without any examination

tion

tion at all; the purpose of this little work will be sufficiently answered. Had the arguments herein used, and the new hints here flung out, been more largely discussed, it might easily have been extended to a more considerable bulk; but then the busy would not have had leisure, nor the idle inclination to have read it. Should it ever have the honour to be admitted into such good company, they will immediately, I know, determine, that it must be the work of some enthusiast or methodist, some beggar, or some madman. I shall therefore beg leave to assure them, that the author is very far removed from all these characters : that
 he

he once perhaps believed as little as themselves; but having some leisure and more curiosity, he employed them both in resolving a question which seemed to him of some importance,—Whether Christianity was really an imposture founded on an absurd, incredible, and obsolete fable, as many suppose it? Or whether it is, what it pretends to be, a revelation communicated to mankind by the interposition of supernatural power? On a candid enquiry, he soon found, that the first was an absolute impossibility, and that its pretensions to the latter were founded on the most solid grounds: In the further pursuit of his examination,

nation, he perceived, at every step, new lights arising, and some of the brightest from parts of it the most obscure, but productive of the clearest proofs, because equally beyond the power of human artifice to invent, and human reason to discover. These arguments, which have convinced him of the divine origin of this religion, he has here put together in as clear and concise a manner as he was able, thinking they might have the same effect upon others, and being of opinion, that if there were a few more true Christians in the world, it would be beneficial to themselves, and by no means detrimental to the public.

F I N I S.

2 DE 64

